

Episode 30: Chosen

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirty: Chosen.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: The Favorite's Feast was just as rowdy as the one that marked the opening ceremonies -- but this time, the favorite poets, rather than Cassian's friends and soldiers, sat at our table. The night before, the four of us - the two kings, Cassian, and I - of us had stared at a list of all of the bards to try and make this cut, scrambling to remember anything about their performances, deliberating, Cassian and I sending hesitant glances to the kings with each name we dared speak. He and I had agreed on Leander - it was the first name that had left my mouth. He'd backed me up, even against the stare his mother sent him.

The gesture was undercut by how the next name he said was *Io*, but all the same. I'd stiffened at that, but the queen had nodded in a way that dared me to open my mouth and contradict her, and I wasn't looking for trouble. I was looking for Cassian and I to say whatever had needed to be done. I was looking for us to do what was required of us until the moment it was time to call Leander.

At the feast, the chair to Cassian's left sat empty still -- but it would be filled by night's end. I wanted to throw up every time I looked at it. *Leander, Leander, Leander, please*, went the thrum of my heart, but the anxieties that stopped me from doing much more than picking at my food threatened to resolve themselves by having me throw up on the banquet table if this wasn't all resolved soon.

All the castle had turned out -- the king was the most sober and least senile I'd seen him in months, the queen at high attention, surveying the tables below her dais like a bird of prey. Servants bustled around, refilling goblets and plates as the poets demanded -- this was a feast for poets, after all, which meant they would drink our castle to flood if we opened enough bottles. The friends and lovers and patrons of the poets we'd selected sat close by, the rest of the court ogling them somewhere behind, and out on the castle steps and in the city square there would be another party, a commiseration of bards

who hadn't found their way into favor and a revelry of common folk who indulged in this last night of lanterns and splendor and songs spun gold. Even Rhia had been allowed downstairs, though she sat at a table far from ours -- I could just make out the tilt of her shoulders some seven tables away, near the other end of the grand room. No amount of whining to either Cassian or Rhia to have her near, rather than shoved into a corner of the room, had been met with anything other than a *this is the way things are* -- but all the same, I was glad she was near.

Even if, beside her, I could see Iolo, and worried at the trouble that she could make.

But those were small rebellions. And grasping at straws was better than grasping at nothing at all.

Leander sat at the far end of our table. Io sat three seats down across from Cassian. I tried not to read too much into that.

As always, with poets, the longer the feast dragged on, the more chairs were scraped back and the rowdier they all got, a mix of drink and unfiltered *life* that hummed through their veins. I don't know who first broke the silence, who first started to sing, but it was as if a dam had suddenly burst, for then the room was carried upwards in echoing songs that climbed to outdo each other, a cacophony of noise and a flurry of movement.

I took my chance, in this chaos, and rose to find Leander.

But by the time I reached their spot, they'd disappeared, another poet among the crowd. I grimaced, frustrated, but promptly slid on a smile as a large hand clapped my shoulder and I turned to face a laird and his poet of choice, both bowing and prattling on in western-Rhysean accents at speeds that moved much too fast for me to more than half-comprehend.

I spread my hands wide and trotted out a practiced sentence, *I'm sorry, I don't understand*, and watched the dim of disappointment filter across their eyes -- I took the reprieve to slip away, farther into the crowd, looking for the only poet that mattered. *Leander, Leander, Leander.*

There -- a glimpse of them near the back of the room. I began to shove my way through the crowd -- *gods damn it, why did it seem like every poet had taken to the floor the minute I needed them all to sit down?* A tray hit the floor, somewhere behind me, and glasses shattered, a collective startled scream rising up from the people around it as they jumped away and tugged at their hems. I whirled around, hands already sliding past each other, reaching for magic, to see what had gone wrong --

And there, across the room, I saw the queen talking to Io. Their heads were bent together. Io was nodding, looking solemn, looking like he was about to bear his fangs in ugly victory.

It didn't take an ounce of premonition to know what she was saying. What announcement was coming. My heart sunk, right down through my chest and into the floor.

But Cassian was not a part of the conversation. Cassian sat in his seat still, talking with some of his guard.

I saw my chance. A last grasping at straws to make things right -- to lift up Cassian and I, to break away from the queen, to shut Io out from whatever destiny lay before us.

I gave up any hope of subtlety. I sprinted for Leander.

And caught them -- near-accosted them, in the back of the room. It was as I grabbed their wrist and they shot me a nervous expression before sinking into a bow that I realized how few words I had -- my brain blanked, precious seconds wasted.

Seanil poeta, I managed, after far too long -- *you are poet*. I pointed across the room. *Seanom rex. Ilt. Noc. Et Cassian*.

We are kings. You. I. And Cassian.

They froze. *We don't have time for this*, I wanted to shout, and began to tug on their sleeve. They yelped, tugging their arm back -- but I saw, all the same.

The veins on their wrist -- the ones that're a green-blue on me, purple-blue on Cassian -- shone faint gold.

It was my turn to freeze.

You -- I whispered, in English. It was them, I realized, beyond any shadow of a doubt. The feeling in my heart wasn't a longing, but a calling -- they were right. They were *it*, the poet, the one that would save us all.

This prophecy was not a role to be chosen, to step into and create. This was a predetermined fate -- and Leander, Leander was a part of it.

Their eyes went wide. And before I could do a single thing, they ran from the room.

Wait -- I called, in English, useless and dumb. I started after them, still shouting, *wait*, before a summons rang down from the high table.

I turned.

On the dais stood Cassian and the kings -- Io by their sides.

The last of my hope died in my chest.

Cassian made the announcement. *We have found our poet*, he proclaimed, his years of public speaking paying off as his voice boomed and fell, rang confident and true.

But -- whispered the voice in my head, *but* -- even as he called out for me, even as I, dazed, took my place beside them. The soldier and poet and king, this false trio we were. Io extended a hand to me, and I, not knowing what else to do, took it, clasping his arm as he looked at me with triumph in his

eyes. His mouth twitched. *But -- said the voice in my head, as the people in the hall fell to their knees, as I found Iolo's face in the crowd, still seated, her eyes saying, wrong choice, Eligida.*

What had I promised? I would find the poet and make it right, I would break from the queen, I would turn Cassian true. I would wait, no matter the lives it cost, for the poet.

I had found the poet, all right. And now they were gone -- and in their place, Io from the Far Shore, a snake and a problem and a lie.

Rise, said Cassian, in his king's voice. His tyrant's voice. Here are your soldier and poet and king. Here are your saviors made whole.

Somewhere out in the world, Leander was running. I'd met them before. I'd made all the wrong choices, it seemed -- and now it was time to pay the piper.

Somewhere out in the world, the Fretim gathered, and yet two of its members stared down at me from the crowd below -- Rhia and Iolo -- with a reminder of how little I'd done.

Somewhere out in the world, the true king sat, and they were not on this throne and not on this dais.

Here are your soldier and poet and king, said the tyrant-kings, and I did not have the words to confront that lie.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Ko-Fi at ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast, where if you leave a topic in your donation box, I'll write you a ridiculous little limerick to read out at the end of the show! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org). Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

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